DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 825 CG 016 692

AUTHOR Ellor, James W.; And Others
TITLE The Role of the Church in the Aging Network.
PUB DATE 22 Nov 82
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (35th, Boston, MA, November 19-23, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Church Programs; *Church Role; *Community Services; Gerontology; *Older Adults; *Social Services; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

For more than a quarter of a century, both human service agencies and religious organizations have provided for the needs of the elderly. In order to study the relationship between these groups, clergy from mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish churches and synagogues (N=34) and social service agency administrators in a midwestern suburb were interviewed. Examination of the data gathered in the interviews indicated that services provided by churches and synagogues fall into four basic groups: (1) religious programs, which include worship services, holiday food basket distribution, transportation to church for the elderly, and assistance for the elderly in climbing stairs; (2) pastoral care services, which include hospital visitations to seniors, nursing home visitations, telephone reassurance, home delivered meals, general transportation, free clothing, senior clubs, and educational discussion groups; (3) the Church as host, which includes use of the church or synagogue as a nutrition site and home companion service wherein outside social service agencies borrow the building and provide staff and programming; and (4) the Church as service provider, in which the Church has actually created its own social service agency, in this case a home companion service. The results suggest that churches and synagogues have moved from providing a majority of the services for the elderly to providing support for the social service agencies, which currently provide most of the needed services. In this particular midwestern community, the church functions mainly as a helping neighbor in an area rich in formal social service resources. (AG)

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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE AGING NETWORK

James W. Ellor, M.Div., ACSW
Project Director
The Church As Service Provider Project
The School of Social Service Administration
The University of Chicago

Sheldon S. Tobin, Ph.D.
Director
Ringel Institute of Gerontology
State University of New York at Albany
Principal Investigator
The Church As Service Provider Project

Susan M. Anderson-Ray, M.A.
Project Associate
The Church As Service Provider Project
The School of Social Service Administration
The University of Chicago

Presented at:
The Gerontological Society of America
35th Annual Meeting
Boston, Massachusets
November 22, 1982

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This project is funded by
The Retirement Research Foundation

For more than a quarter century, both human service agencies, as well as Churches and Synagogues, have been providing for the needs of the elderly. The services of these two groups have ranged from informal visitation to formal counseling, housing, and nutrition sites. During the last decade, those of us who are involved with the elderly have begun to discuss the "Aging Network". While this concept of service provision professes to include the range of programs and agencies that provide for the needs of the elderly, little, if any attention has been paid to the role of the Church(1) in the Aging Network.

During the past two and a half years our project has studied, and worked with churches and social service agencies to explore the relationship between these two groups, as well as developing a model to assist in the enhancement of their work together. Due to the constraints of time, this paper will seek only to address the role of the church in the aging network. In an effort to further narrow our topic, we will use the data from only one of the six communities studied to illustrate our position.

1.) In this context, "church" refers to Christian Churches of all denominations, as well as Jewish Synagogues. "Clergy," likewise, refers to ministers, priests, and rabbis, as well as other clergymen and clergywomen.

ELM TOWM

For the purposes of this paper, we are going to discuss Elm Town (E.T.). Elm Town is part of the first ring of suburbs which surrounds a major midwestern city. It is located approximately nine miles from the center of the city. A population of approximately 55,000 persons is supported in a land space of 4.6 square miles. Incorporated in 1902, approximately 79 percent of Elm Town is zoned for residential use. Elm Town is considered by many to be an older community. Both its buildings, and more importantly, its people are growing old, with 16.5 percent of the population over the age of 65.

This community, once known as "Saints' Rest" has a rich tradition of active church participation. During our work in this community we identified 48 churches and synagogues. Currently, it is estimated that the population is 52 percent Roman Catholic, with four parishes; 40 percent Protestant, with 40 congregations, and 8 percent other, with one Jewish synagogue and three additional religious groups.

Elm Town is also rich in human services. Through contacts with community representatives, service directories, and the phone book, thirty - eight organizations are known to offer some kind of service to the residents of this community, 18 of which were identified as both based in Elm Town, and as providing services only to seniors.

This community was selected because it contains Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups, as well as a wide variety of human service agencies that meet the needs of the elderly. Thus our example represents a service rich community where we could examine the interaction of churches and social agencies through existing services and programs. This community is clearly not representative of all communities. Therefore, its utility as a generalizable model is only found in its ability to address the concerns of your local community.

THE METHODOLOGY

Three groups were surveyed over a four month period. Clergy from 34 churches and synagogues were interviewed. Of the remaining fourteen churches, four interviews did not lend themselves to the use of the formal instrument, four were unable to be reached, and six declined to be interviewed. While this does not represent a total sample, it does represent the mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups in the community. Of the eighteen social service agencies that exclusively serve the elderly in this community, we were able to conduct face to face interviews with sixteen agency administrators. Of the remaining two agencies, one could not be reached, and one declined to be interviewed. Along with the church, and social service agency interviews, we obtained a small purposive sample of senior citizens. While these seventy three questionnaires proved to be of interest to the local groups, they contained no representative data, and

will not be discussed further. While our samples did not include institutional services such as Nursing Homes, and Hospitals, and was only minimally able to interview the small independent fundamentalist churches, we feel that it represents a useful picture of the community based services and mainline churches that serve the seniors of Elm Town.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN ELM TOWN'S AGING NETWORK

In our investigation into the role of the church in the aging network, we have found that the services provided by churches fall into four basic groups. These are:

1.) Religious Programs
2.) Pastoral Care Programs
3.) The Church As Host
4.) The Church As Service Provider

In the language of the Social Sciences, these services range from informal to formal. Some of them involve trained professionals both clergy, and others, and some do not. Indeed, many of the people doing the actual work in these programs were not clergy. While we made no effort to obtain information as to the quality, or effectiveness of these programs and services, it is clear that this varies from group to group, and service to service.

Religious Programs. The category of religious programs includes the sort of activities that one would most likely anticipate emanating from the church or synagogue. For example, this

includes the weekend worship services that are held in a majority of churches. When we examine the religious programs available in Elm Town, we find that 76% of the churches have Bible studies, 38% hold special worship services for seniors, and 71% participate in a local holiday food basket distribution. Also of concern in this category of programs are the various activities that churches engage in that are intended to aid seniors in participating in worship. In Elm Town 100% of the clergy stated that they provide some sort of transportation assistance for helping seniors to participate in church activities. The clergy also noted that 88% of their congregations have public address systems at least in their sanctuary, and another 15% had hearing aids for use during worship. While many of the churches in this community still have architectural barriers, 76% of the churches noted that they would be able to assist seniors up the stairs.

The importance of religious programs is best summarized by the statistic from Lewis Harris(2) that suggests that 79% of the seniors surveyed had attended a church or synagogue within the past two weeks. The pastoral care literature reminds us that unlike other activities and groups, the church is generally a part of the individual's life from cradle to grave. The church baptizes, marries, and buries, with everything in between. For many seniors the church offers a continuity in their lives, that may not

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2.) Harris, L. and Associates, The Myth and Reality of Aging in America, (National council on the Aging, Inc., Washington, D.C. 1975), pp.180-181.

otherwise be available outside of the family. It is often the religious activities that are continued after other activities have ceased.

Pastoral Care Services. The next group refers to the pastoral care services available in the church. This category breaks into two sub groups, services for individuals, and programs for groups. These programs and services range from the informal to the formal. They are generally directed toward the members of the congregation and are a part of the general life of the congregation. The services for individuals in Elm Town include visitation to seniors in the hospital (100%), visitation to the homebound (94%), visitation to nursing homes (88%), Telephone reassurance (71%), home delivered meals (33%), and assistance with housekeeping (32%). It can also include such things as general transportation (62%), food distribution programs (62%), and free clothing (35%). As a general rule, it should be noted that when the clergy reported that they do these things they are not implying that they keep a large store of food available, or that they run a dial-a-bus transportation program. Rather, if Mrs Jones calls the pastor in need of a ride, the pastor calls Mrs Smith, who takes Mrs Jones to the doctor. If Mrs Jones is having trouble preparing meals, the pastor may call on the ladies club to help her out. Were the pastor to receive more than a handful of such requests in any given month, they would not be able to handle them.

When we are discussing the individual services, we can see that in this category, the church acts in much the same way as a friend, or neighbor. Froland et al(3) have suggested that the role of the church in the human service network is as a natural helping neighbor. As one pastor stated "Our church helps its members because they are a part of our family, not because we see ourselves as social service agencies."(4)

The second subgroup of pastoral care services are the group activities. In Elm Town these may include senior clubs or groups, (74%), educational discussion groups, (74%), and discussion groups for younger people on aging (24%). In other communities this has included support groups for adult children dealing with aging parents, and other self help groups for seniors. (e.g. stroke and diabetes clubs etc.) The focus of these group activities may, or may not include what could be called religious concerns. While some advertising may be done to attract participants from the community, they generally do not include a fee, and may not even include a leader specifically trained to perform this type of service. These group activities move the church one step closer to the type of service provided by social agencies. However, they are still not considered as such by either the church, or the participants.

3.) Froland,C.; Pancoast,D.L.; Chapman,N.J. and Kimboko,P.J., Helping Networks and Human Services, (Sage Publications, Beverly Hills Ca. 1981).
4.) King, Rev., Oral statement at the Elm Town Community Meeting, May 1982.

In summary, the pastoral care programs and services range from informal neighbor helping neighbor style activities, to more formal types of counseling, and group activites. It should be noted that the term pastoral in this context does not mean that the professional clergy are the only ones involved. Often these services and programs are developed and lead by lay members of the congregation. While clergy are often interested and supportive of such activities, Steinitz(5) found that a majority of services developed by churches are lead by lay persons, not clergy. Sometimes these lay church members hold professional social work or counseling degrees, but often this is not the case. They are people who are concerned and want to help. Indeed, Ellor, Anderson-Ray and Tobin(6) found that a lack of lay leadership is often the primary barrier to the church's ability to provide services to the elderly. Thus, pastoral care programs are generally seen by both the church and the participants as emanating out of the congregation as a part of their care and concern for the members of their community. They are not intended to be formal social service programs.

The Church As Host. Particularly since the 1972 Ammendments to the Older Americans Act, the Church has become host to numerous social service activities. Possibly the most common of these

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5.) Steinitz, L.Y., "The Local Church as Support for the Elderly." Journal of Gerontological Social Work, Volume 4, Number 2, (Winter 1981), PP. 43 - 53.
6.) Ellor, James W., Anderson-Ray, Susan M., Tobin, Sheldon S., "The Role of the Church in Services to the Elderly," Interdisciplinary Topics in Gerontology, (In Press).

are the meal programs. It is not unusual to find the local Area Agency on Aging providing some of their lunch programs in the basements of local churches. In recent years, churches have become conscious of the fact that their education buildings stand empty during the week seeing their greatest use only on weekends. In Elm Town we found two instances of the church loaning or renting space to local social agencies. This includes a nutrition sight, and a home companion service. It is important to note that with this category of services, there may be little or no interaction between the worshiping congregation and the consumers of the social service. In effect the agency is borrowing the church building, but not the congregation. Even though the service may be available to the members of the congregation it has been reported to our researchers that at least in one case, it is easer to get the members of the church to volunteer to assist the program than it is to attract the members of the congregation who need the service into it.

The Church As Service Provider. In this final category, the local church actually creates a social service agency. Generally in response to a gap within the local social service network, the church will create services for one of two reasons. Either the need for the service has become clear, and the church is in a position to respond, or the service may exist elsewhere in the community, but the other service may adhere to a value system that is contrary to that of the church.

In Elm Town, one example exists where a church has become a service provider. One of the local Catholic Churches, with some assistance from other churches, created a home companion service, because at the time it was unavailable. This service has been available for over ten years, and is now publicly funded. While housed in the original Catholic Church, it is a formal social service agency. In other communities churches have created housing projects for the elderly, as well as other types of social services. Examples of churches providing services that adhere to their values include nursing homes, retirement facilities, and senior centers. Possibly the oldest example of this type of endeavor are our parochial schools.

Please note that we are not including in this analysis the services, programs, and institutions created by denominational groups. While such things as Catholic Charities and Jewish Social Services are not unimportant to the local congregation, we are referring only to those services that are actually provided by one or more local congregations within a specific geographic community.

DISCUSSION

As we examine the role of the church in the aging network, we can see that over time it has changed. While a majority of retirement facilities at the turn of the century were run by religious groups, today this is no longer true. Since the turn

of the century the church has moved from providing a majority of human services, to a less formal form of service provision. While some churches today continue to provide formal social services, both as individual congregations and by supporting social service agencies associated with their denominations, they tend to do so in a gap filling capacity, while allowing publicly funded agencies to to provide a majority of the services. Indeed, in today's social service climate, when the church does work to create a formal human service or social service agency, it often seeks, after a brief period of time, to spin it off as an independent entity.

It is important to understand that while churches are valuable resources made up of people who care about the plight of others, most do not conceive of themselves as service providers. The church is primarily a caring community that cares about the well-being of its members, as well as those around them. It is out of this notion of being a caring community that social service activities emanate. Among the ramifications of this is the fact that often churches lack the technical expertise contained in the social service agency for the provision of the service. In short, they are often long on caring and short on expertise. It is equally important to note that since the church is a volunteer association, it often does not have a great deal of time available from its professional staff (e.g., the clergy) to direct the activities. Thus, as a source of service provision to people in need, many churches have a great deal of goodwill, but

often lack technical expertise and adequate time from clergy.

While it is difficult to capture in the survey format, the church in Elm Town plays a quiet role as a support system to the social service agencies. In at least one case it was a concerned pastor who promoted the creation, by the village, of a senior center. Churches also support local agencies through volunteer efforts. While these types of assistance are difficult to quantify, they are an important part of the churches understanding of its approach to assisting the local service network.

When we compare the community of Elm Town with the others in our study, we can see that it is exceptional in many ways. This community is quite involved in everything from Bible study to community concerns. It is also a community that is service rich. It has been the observation of our project that in communities where there is a great deal of human need, and few social service agencies, the church plays a greater role in providing both formal and informal social services. Finally, unlike many other communities, Elm Town has a senior services coordinating council that includes one of the local clergy. While this pastor does not represent all of the churches and synagogues in the community, he is elected by the local clergy council, and can give input on church concerns to the coordinating council.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when we examine the role of the church in the aging network of Elm Town, we can see that it does not play one role, but many roles. The church provides a caring community for its members. It also provides many informal services similar to those that one could request from their family. In this community, churches provide group activities, and concrete social services, by providing space in their buildings, through direct service, or by assisting the creation of social service agencies. However, its main role is as a helping neighbor. This would seem to be an appropriate role for them in this community, as it is rich in formal social service resources. However, in the current changing climate of budget cuts and reduction of services, it remains to be seen what changes will be made in Elm Town in the role of the church and synagogue.